The Mystery of Spontaneous Human Combustion

Every year, unexplained deaths by fire are reported in sufficient numbers to warrant further scientific investigation.

Judging by the wild theories proposed, the cause of this phenomenon may be stranger than fiction.

by Richard Giles

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Jacqueline had just finished her cookery exam. It was a cold late January day in 1985 in Widness, England, and Jacqueline was seventeen. She left the room to wait by the door for several minutes for two classmates to leave. They met and headed off through the building complex. A couple of minutes' walking took them to some steps and as they descended in the company of other students, Jacqueline's back burst into flames. Her two horrified friends afterwards described how it appeared that a ball of light fell down her back and broke out into fire.

The flames were doused and she was rushed to hospital, but she died fifteen days later. At the inquest, the government chemist theorised that she must have leaned against a cooking flame which caused her catering jacket to smoulder unnoticed. He suspected that when she entered the corridor outside and down the stairs, draughts in the building caused the jacket to burst out in flames. However, no witness to the fire saw any smouldering nor smelt any smoke until the moment of the fire. A report by the local fire brigade disagreed with the chemist's assessment.

The press seized on this extraordinary incident and called it a case of Spontaneous Human Combustion. The official report blamed the smouldering jacket and left unanswered the question of how a healthy seventeen-year-old could burst into flames in the open, in broad daylight, with no obvious cause.

The case attracted ongoing media interest. It also sparked the interest of Jenny Randles and Peter Hough in doing some first-hand research into the mystery of Spontaneous Human Combustion (SHC). That research came to fruition in 1992 with the publication of their book by the same name. I'm indebted to them for the opportunity to draw much material for this article from their book.

The very notion of a human body bursting into flames spontaneously, i.e., without any obvious or outward means of combustion, is a strange one. It's hard to believe that it could happen. It just doesn't appear on the front pages of newspapers every day. Where is the evidence? Where are all the bodies that burst into flame periodically to make this phenomenon believable?

It might surprise you to know that, according to Randles and Hough, anything up to 100 SHC events per year may happen in the United Kingdom alone. That makes one every three days! Fire statistics in the UK for 1989 show 901 deaths from fire. More than half of these were from accidental fires in dwellings caused by smokers' materials and matches. The highest death rates occur in the under five-year-olds and over sixty-fives. Accidental fires in households and other occupied dwellings totalled 110,159. Of these, 2,589 remained "unspecified", which means there was not even circumstantial evidence to allocate a cause. The "unspecified" fires resulted in 90 deaths and 466 non-fatalities (Randles and Hough, p. 245).

Multiply that figure of 90 unexplained deaths by approximately 50 (UK's population is around one fiftieth of the world's), and you get 4,500 cases per year. This figure must be taken as a rough guess, but nevertheless it shows how the occurrence of SHC, while small on a global scale, may be more common than we realise.

CHARACTERISTICS OF SPONTANEOUS COMBUSTION

By far the most common description of death by fire in unusual circumstances fits into the following. The person's remains are usually found in a burnt-out chair or bed. The furniture on which they were sitting or lying is often totally consumed. Often only a small part of the body is found—sometimes part of an arm or the hands, or just the bottom half of one or both legs. There are sometimes pieces of internal organs—some ashed bones or carbonised liver or other organ. The head is sometimes still intact or may be

partly burned, leaving the hair or upper face intact. A common characteristic is the strong smell or stench of fat or a sticky-sweet burnt smell. The same fatty deposits are often found on the walls of the room.

The area around the remains is often untouched. For example, the chair in which the person last sat may be burnt to ash, but everything in the room outside a radius of three feet (one metre) would remain untouched. Newspapers may stay unburnt, and books or other flammable material may be left untouched. Houses made of timber or any combustibles are usually not burnt.

The temperature necessary to consume a human body and turn the bones to ash is estimated to be beyond that of any normal crematorium. Funeral directors quoted by Randles and Hough (pp. 61-62) stated that bodies are burnt at a temperature of between 600 and 950 degrees Centigrade. This process produces ash from human organs—but the skeletal bone is still intact even after one-and-a-half hours. Additional burning only turns the bones blacker but does not reduce them to ash. In the crematorium process, bones must then be raked out and crushed by mechanical means.

In all cases of SHC in this article, the bones are destroyed, leaving only ash. The temperatures necessary to do this in a very short space of time are estimated to be in the order of 2,000 to 3,000 degrees Centigrade. Temperatures of this order ought to conflagrate an entire room, but again and again we'll see this does not happen. Further, many cases of SHC have taken place in open, well-ventilated areas, in gardens, on boats, on a dance floor, and even while walking in the street (the opening paragraphs quote such a case).

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Mary Hardy Reeser: Among the more famous cases is the one of Mary Reeser. Photographs of her remains have been used in the *Time-Life Library of Unusual Facts* (1991).

She was a 67-year-old, reasonably plump woman who had left her native Pennsylvania to be near her son, Dr Richard Reeser, in St Petersburg, Florida. It was a hot, muggy July evening in 1951. Mary Reeser had walked home to her apartment near her son's home after he had not immediately taken her home following some babysitting she had done with the youngest child. The family had come home from the beach, and while her son took a shower she walked home. His wife went after her in the car and arrived at her door as she did.

She settled Mrs Reeser in and then left for her home. That was around 5 pm. The son decided around 8 pm to go over to see his mother as she had been depressed and crying earlier that evening. He found her in her nightie, and having taken two sleeping pills she was relaxing smoking a cigarette. He left soon after she had settled, and, according to others at the apartments, her lights went out at around 9 pm.

At 8 am a telegram boy came by with a telegram for Mrs Reeser. Pansy Carpenter, the apartment owner, took the telegram and decided to deliver it personally to Mary. Arriving at the apartment's screen door, she found the knob hot to touch and the door unlocked. She called to the telegram boy and two painters across the road. They came over and one went inside. He backed out, finding the apartment full of smoke, and immediately advised calling the fire brigade. The fire officers arrived, went in and opened windows to let out the smoke. Only a small fire remained on one overhead beam and it was easily extinguished.

As the smoke cleared, they saw the remains of a foot protruding from some ashes. Most of Mrs Reeser, the chair she was in and most of the table next to her were burnt to ashes. The apartment ceiling was blackened. The walls and drapes where similarly affected. Smoke affected the bathroom as well. Apart from those furniture items, no other furniture was burnt or marked. The electrical equipment was all intact, with the exception of the electric clock which had stopped at 4.20 am.

All that remained of Mrs Reeser's body was a few teeth, a (reportedly) shrunken skull, a charred liver attached to a piece of bone, a piece of what appeared to be a hip-bone, and her left foot in a black satin slipper from the ankle down. Identification of the remains was made on the slipper!

The fire officers, suspecting a crime and subsequent arson of the apartment, called in the FBI. Nothing was missing. The FBI suspected that only some type of fire accelerant could have been responsible for the body being almost totally consumed. Nothing else would explain it. However, they could not find any trace of oxidising chemicals, petroleum hydrocarbons or any other volatile fluids or chemicals which would initiate or accelerate the fire. (Randles and Hough, p. 82).

The "Bert Jones" Case: The name adopted here is a pseudonym to protect the family of the man involved. It happened on a winter afternoon in January 1980 in a small town near Ebbw Vale, Wales, UK. Police who were called to the house found a bizarre and perplexing scene unlike anything they had ever encountered. This fiery death was impossible, yet there it was before their eyes.

Police found a pile of ash heaped on the floor in front of an undisturbed fire-grate. Two human feet wearing undamaged socks were at end of the ash. Further away from the pile was a blackened human skull. The armchair in which the victim had sat when he caught fire was singed but unburnt. Less than a metre away, a loose-covered settee, which by rights should have been burnt, remained totally unaffected. Only the carpet that was immediately in contact with the remains was burnt, but just centimetres away it was untouched. Plastic floor tiles under the carpet were also untouched. The TV set in the room was slightly affected, but only on its plastic knobs.

When police arrived, the walls were glowing orange, like a furnace cooling off after use. Black soot covered the surfaces of everything in the room. A nearby plastic lampshade had melted. A sticky orange substance found on the light-bulb turned out to be human flesh that had vaporised in the incredible heat. What could raise such incredible temperatures as to totally incinerate the body yet leave adjacent inflammable objects almost unaffected?

SOME HISTORICAL INCIDENTS OF SHC

Historical evidence for strange fires, like the two described above, spans the centuries. These accounts have been drawn from the research of Randles and Hough.

26 June 1613: Dorset carpenter John Hitchen went to bed in the evening after a normal day. His wife's mother, who slept in another room, was awoken by a sound blow to her cheek during an electrical storm in the night. She called out to the family but no one replied. She found her daughter in bed with one side of her body burnt, and Mr Hitchen and child dead. His body, still burn-

ing, was dragged out into the street and had to be left there. It burnt for three days, finally being reduced to ashes.

October 1836: An overweight woman, 74 years old, met her death by fire in Auney, Avalon, France, according to the *Medico-Chururgical Review* of the same month. Townsfolk broke into the house when they realised they had not seen her for some time. They found her partially combusted remains near the chimney. A blue flame was still burning on the grease remains and could not be put out.

July 1847: At 11 pm, the Count of Gorlitz in Darmstadt, Germany, returned home to find his wife's badly burnt body in her room close to some burnt furniture. No evidence of a crime was found and her physician concluded she had died of spontaneous combustion. The manservant was later charged with murder but the charges were dropped when it was found how hard it is to ignite a human body. Later still, he was supposed to have confessed to the crime but the circumstances remain unclear.

1847: An article published in *Scientific American* reports from a Dr Nott how a 25-year-old man, an "habitual drinker", was seen by the doctor at 9 pm, and two hours later was found incinerated from the top of his head to the soles of his feet. A blacksmith discovered him in his shop, standing up in the midst of a silver-coloured flame. The premises did not catch fire, and according to Dr Nott there was no external cause for the fire.

February 1851: A French house-painter in the midst of a drinking session bet he could eat a lighted candle. He placed it in his mouth and immediately a bluish flame burst from his lips. In half an hour his head and the upper half of his chest were carbonised. His entire body was eventually consumed, leaving only a pile of ashes.

December 1851: A 50-year-old French washerwoman named Marie Jeanne Antoinette Bally had returned, drunk, to her lodgings one evening. At 8 am next morning, her remains were found along with her chair. The top part of her body from the shoulders up, including hair, was untouched. Her lower legs were also intact. The rest of her body was badly charred and there was no sign of fire in the grate. The only sign of a possible source was an earthen pot, full of coals, as used by poorer folk to warm their feet.

1866: The corpse of an Englishman buried thirteen months previously was found on fire in its vault. The day before, a foul smell had been noticed issuing from the floor. The source was the coffin which had burst and a liquid was oozing from the body. Workers put sawdust in to stop the flow, but the next morning they found the body burning with a blue flame and giving off an offensive smell. It was suggested that a workman had dropped in a lighted taper after having a cigarette.

February 1888: Dr Booth of Aberdeen, Scotland, was called to investigate the burnt remains of a 65-year-old man in a hayloft. The body was destroyed, though none of the loose and bundled hay that lay around had ignited. Dr Booth said there was no death struggle, ruling out a crime, and when the body was moved it disintegrated into ash.

May 1890: Dr B. H. Hartwell of Ayer, Massachusetts, while out on a call, found in a wooded area a woman who had burst into flame. Her clothing was almost consumed, and the body, lifting away from the ground due to muscle rigidity, was burning with flames up to fifteen inches high. The fire was smothered with soil. Leaves, a straw hat and a wooden spade handle next to her remained untouched.

January 1899: Two sisters in the Kirby family who lived in the same town across the valley from each other at Sowerby Bridge, Halifax in Yorkshire, England, allegedly died in flames at the same moment. The coroner could find no cause for ignition of the fire in either case. He dismissed the simultaneous deaths as a "shocking coincidence".

December 1904: Mrs Clark, a pensioner of Hull, in Yorkshire, England, was found terribly burned on her bed. She survived the fire, but had no explanation for the flames which did not even scorch her bedsheets.

1907: Two police constables in Manner, Dinapore in India, found the burned body of a village woman. There was no other sign of fire around her. They carried the still-smouldering corpse in unscorched clothes to the district magistrate's office.

July 1938: Mrs Mary Carpenter was on holiday on a cabin cruiser at Norfolk Broads, England, when she burst into flames. There was no apparent reason for the fire which engulfed her entire body and reduced her to a charred corpse.

Samples like these are taken from a list of over one hundred cases. A lack of any real cause for the fires is what they all seem to have in common. Often the fire seems to begin in the body—usually in the chest, abdomen or deep muscles. Sometimes the flames are seen to be blue or other unusual colours. Extremities of the body are often left intact, and quite commonly there is little evident effect on furniture or clothing in the room near to the body, except for the chair or bed on which the person sat or lay. Sometimes even the bed is left intact! The burnt parts of the body are often totally consumed, leaving just ash. Even the largest bones are turned to powder.

The fire often proceeds with the victim feeling no apparent pain or at least making no sound. In 1905, a case in Binbrook, Lincolnshire, UK, was reported where a housemaid was observed to carry on sweeping the floor while flames engulfed her shoulders. She was saved by quick intervention (Randles and Hough, *Fortean Times* #63). Another frequently reported observation is an unpleasant greasy, fatty tar that coats the walls and other surfaces at the scene. This seems to be fat from the burnt body.

John Heymer's reconstruction of the scene that greeted his eyes when he arrived at the house in Ebbw Vale, taken from his own photograph. (Source: *Fortean Times* #74, April/May 1994)

SPONTANEOUS HUMAN COMBUSTION THEORIES

While many writers have demonstrated their belief in SHC, they have not all come up with a theory that would explain spontaneous fires in so many different circumstances. Randles and Hough put forward a number of propositions for the origins of these fierce, unexplained fires (*Fortean Times* #63, June/July 1992):

• **The Supernatural:** The traditional religious explanation for SHC was that it is some kind of divine retribution for sinners, fanatics and other transgressors of divine law. The thunderbolt from heaven is a form of this retribution. The famous "pillar of fire" that consumes some sinners may be understood in this way. Through the centuries, sudden burnings have often been blamed on demons and witches.

• **Murder Cover-up:** One of the most common reasons advanced in forensic casebooks and studies of SHC is that it is used as a cover-up for murder or crime. The victim is incinerated to cover the evidence of a murder or theft.

• **The Wick Theory:** This has been advanced by an English academic, Prof. David Gee, and used in the BBC TV programme, *Q.E.D.*, when they screened a special, titled "A Case of Spontaneous Human Combustion?", in April 1989. The theory is that burning clothes boil the body water away (the human body is approx. 70 per cent water), and the melted fat of the body becomes like a wick which continues to burn slowly until all the fatty tissue has been burnt away. It consumes everything, including bone, without actually destroying the room around the victim. Drawbacks with this theory include evidence from crematoria experience with human bodies, showing that the extremely high temperature needed to consume bone would be very difficult to generate in a smouldering body. It also ignores the cases where rapid combustion has been seen outside in daylight by many witnesses.

• **Alcohol:** The most popular theory up to the early twentieth century was that victims of SHC were great imbibers of alcohol or were even perpetual drunks, and that the high level of alcohol in their bodies ignited spontaneously from home fires, candles or matches. This theory falls down in the face of all the cases of non-drinkers and children who have been victims of SHC.

• **The Forced Draught:** This ties in with the Wick Theory, in that the person who combusts has been caught in a draught from a chimney and door or window which ignites the smouldering body to such a degree that it can combust the entire frame and flesh. This explanation falls down in cases where the person has died in a sealed or closed room, such as in the "Bert Jones" fire in Wales mentioned earlier.

• **The Human Fuel Cell:** Ex-fireman John Heymer from England proposed it was possible that an unknown electrochemical reaction in the body may split the body's water into hydrogen and oxygen; the hydrogen flame, consuming the oxygen very rapidly and leaping from cell to cell, could consume tissue quickly, burning up the body and extinguishing itself as the oxygen is used up. This happens so fast it doesn't burn the surroundings.

• **Body Chemistry:** Ivan Sanderson, who writes for *Fortean Times*, proposed that loneliness might act on the body to produce an accumulation of inflammable nitroglycerine-like phosphagens in muscle tissue. What if these processes went out of control and were ignited? Dr Joyce Nelson suggested that large amounts of methane can accumulate in the stomachs of cattle and other stock and cause bloating. Often the only way to release it is to make an incision in the stomach and vent the gas. Perhaps this could happen in humans where excessive stomach gas causes an excess of methane which, when combined with oxygen upon release from the bowels, could cause a spontaneous fire? The result would be a phenomenally fiery fart!

• **Psychic Heat:** Within the yogic tradition and other eastern ways, it is considered quite possible that the the heat mechanism of the body can be controlled. Yogis can sit in the freezing snow and need no protection from sub-zero temperatures. In fact, they can generate enough heat to melt snow. Perhaps in some cases of SHC there is an element in the body's temperature control system that goes haywire?

• **Electromagnetism:** There has been speculation about the effect of electromagnetic and microwave radiation from power sources in SHC cases. Could electrical fields have something to do with it? In 1975, one researcher, Livingston Gearhart, found a correlation between changes in the peaks of the Earth's geomagnetic field and spontaneous human combustion events.

• **Nuclear Disintegration:** The life-force that holds the basic particles of the body together could undergo some sort of malfunction and start giving off heat in the same way that nuclear power stations or a nuclear detonation gives off heat as the product of fission. Could this—a very limited nuclear reaction—be a possible explanation for SHC?

A four-year-old Chinese boy had been spontaneously bursting into flame at various parts of his body. Fifty minutes after arriving in hospital, the boy started smoking again. During the next two hours he spontaneously ignited four times. Doctors quoted in... newspapers said the boy's body had a strong electric current running through it.

• **Dimensional Breakdown:** This theory has been put forward to me in private conversation. Could it be possible that from time to time other dimensional realities interface with ours, the resultant effect being massive heat or temporary breakdown of the principles of matter and atomic force? If so, the breakdown occurring in an individual might give rise to spontaneous incineration. If it lasts only a few seconds or minutes, this could explain why portions of a body still remain and why furniture and clothing are often left untouched. We have examples of fish, frogs and sometimes even human beings suddenly falling from the sky or appearing on the ground, seemingly from nowhere. Is SHC somehow related to this when things go awry dimensionally?

• **Mathematics:** In an article in *R.I.L.K.O. Journal* (No. 45, Autumn/Winter 1994), Dr A. M. Davie proposes that SHC may be related to geophysical effects. Using Ordnance Survey Maps, he studied the geometric pattern established chronologically from a series of fires in Scotland in the last few decades. He suggests that with sufficient cases, a pattern can be ascertained and SHC predicted in advance. This technique, he claims, can also be used to predict spontaneous combustion in other flammable materials in factories, farms, etc. He suggests certain elements become unstable at predictable times of the day.

A story from the newspapers in 1990 showed another aspect of SHC that adds to the puzzle. A four-year-old Chinese boy had been spontaneously bursting into flame at various parts of his body. His grandmother first saw smoke coming from his trousers, and a hole was burnt through several layers of clothing. Fifty minutes after arriving in hospital, the boy started smoking again. During the next two hours he spontaneously ignited four times. Doctors quoted in Chinese newspapers said the boy's body had a strong electric current running through it (*The Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 May 1990).

FURTHER FIERY PHENOMENA

Strange, apparent spontaneous combustion events can also occur in buildings and objects and even affect entire towns and landscapes. One famous occurrence, which received considerable publicity at the time, was a series of weird fires that broke out in Macomb, Illinois, USA, in August 1946.

In the book, *Mysterious Fires And Lights* (Borderland Sciences Research Foundation, 1994), author Vincent Gaddis describes the following scenario. On 7th August 1946 at the Charles Willey farm 12 miles south of Macomb, small brown spots began to appear on the wallpaper in the five-bedroom house. The Willey family consisted of Charles and his wife, his brother-in-law Arthur McNeil and Arthur's two children.

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The spots were around two to three inches in diameter (five to nine centimetres) and were in fact scorch marks. On reaching an estimated 450 degrees Fahrenheit they ignited, setting the wallpaper on fire. Day after day, more and more spots appeared. Neighbours came to help keep watch and douse the fires. Pans and buckets were placed at strategic points throughout the house. The Fire Chief of Macomb, Fred Wilson, was called in. He had Charles Willey strip the paper away, but the brown spots continued to appear on the bare boards and even on the ceilings.

Over the next week, fire spots began to appear outside on the porch. Curtains were ignited, an ironing board burnt, and cloth on a bed burnt to ash. The insurance company reported that the wallpaper was not coated with cockroach repellent and was therefore phosphorus-free. Fire Chief Wilson was quoted as saying: "The whole thing is so screwy and fantastic that I'm almost ashamed to talk about it."

By Sunday 14th August, over two hundred fires had broken out—an average of almost 29 per day! On that day, the blazes reached sufficient frequency that they raged out of control and burnt down the home. Willey set up a tarpaulin and posts in the yard for a makeshift tent. The McNeils moved into the garage. The next day, the barn went up in flames. Two days later, the milkhouse (now being used as a dining room) had spot fires. On the Thursday, the second barnhouse burnt down. A fire extinguisher salesman was at the scene with his equipment but the fire was so intense that he was helpless. On the Friday, both families left the farm and the US Air Force got involved.

Their chief technician, Lewis Gust, thought perhaps "very high frequencies and short waves" may be responsible. By Sunday 22nd August, over one thousand sightseers and investigators had visited the farm. Fires continued to ignite. Investigators ruled out fly spray, radio waves, underground gas and many other explanations. On 30th August, Deputy Marshal Burgard announced he'd solved the mystery: it was arson and the culprit was thirteen-year-old Wanet McNeil, Charles Willey's niece! Simple!

The Deputy Marshal and the Illinois State Attorney had taken her aside and closely questioned her. She admitted it. She wasn't happy with her father. She missed her mother. She didn't want to live on the farm. Forgotten were all the witnesses to the hundreds

of spot fires. Forgotten were the spontaneous fires on the ceiling (how did Wanet climb up there?). Forgotten were the mysterious brown spots appearing in front of reliable eyewitnesses.

Apart from the obvious attempt to rationalise by using the thirteen-year-old as a scapegoat, here was an extraordinary set of spontaneous fires that had investigators up to the US Air Force stumped. What did it? We'll never know now, but it is an amazing record of spontaneous combustion that has puzzled investigators for decades.

Two other great and mystifying fires are worth mentioning here. It was Sunday evening, 8th October 1871 when a series of fires began across the midwestern states of the USA at the end of a three-month drought. The Great Fire of Chicago was the one that grabbed the headlines. It began at 9.25 pm in the lumber district of the west side. For twenty-seven hours it raged, destroying 17,500 buildings, taking 250 lives and causing US$200 million damage. Fire hoses were turned to ash and water turned to spray in the winds accompanying the fire. According to eyewitnesses, each time it was controlled, buildings far away from the fires burst into flames from the interior outwards. The flames melted the hardest stone, fused piles of iron two hundred feet from fires, and at one stage turned on itself and burnt half a mile into the teeth of the massive gales of wind. Green, blue and red flames were seen by eyewitnesses throughout the city. Across the USA, massive tornadoes of fire burnt millions of acres of forest, destroyed dozens of towns and killed several thousand people.

On 16th June 1945 in Almería province, Spain, another strange set of fires occurred. According to reports, they began in white clothing spread out on the ground to dry. For the next twenty days, over three hundred fires began without visible cause, burning barns, farmhouses, threshing bins, and clothing drying in yards. In almost every instance the objects catching fire were white. Spanish government officials sent scientists to the town of La Roda, seat of the fires, to investigate. One scientist had his box of instruments burst into flames during his investigation. Scientists suggested it was due to St Elmo's Fire or underground mineral deposits. On 5th July, a column of whirling brown wind struck a small settlement, kindling thirty-foot flames. Very soon after this, the fires died away (Gaddis, 1994).

The phenomenon of apparent spontaneous combustion in human beings is one that gets little serious investigation from fire and forensic authorities around the world. Yet we've seen there may be a hundred or more cases a year of unexplained fires that totally consume human beings, leaving little trace apart from the remains of a leg or hand. The room in which the person is incinerated is often unburnt. This type of fire ought to mystify even the most rational of investigators—yet it doesn't seem to inspire sufficient interest in the rigorous scientific research required to pinpoint the cause of spontaneous human combustion. Perhaps the subject will get a more thorough, unbiased airing in the mainstream media some time in the near future. ∞

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